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## Thompson discloses discussing House Bill 1020 with Dept. of Justice

Bill would create system of unelected judges, prosecutors in expanded majority-white Jackson district



By C.J. LeMaster

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JACKSON, Miss. (WLBT) - While lawmakers have yet to decide the fate of House Bill 1020 in the Senate, the legislation has already begun to make waves in the nation's capital after U.S. Rep. Bennie Thompson disclosed this week he has been discussing it and possible civil rights concerns with the U.S. Department of Justice.

Thompson, a Democrat who represents Mississippi's second congressional district, made the revelation during an interview with the Black Press Tuesday.

House Bill 1020 would carve out nearly one-fourth of the capital city and establish a new court system with unelected judges and prosecutors for the crimes that take place in what's known as the Capitol Complex Improvement District.

Cliff Johnson, director of the MacArthur Center for Justice at the University of Mississippi School of Law, said that the expanded district would have 80 percent of the majority-Black city's white residents.



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Should the bill become law, Johnson believes it will be challenged on the state and federal level almost immediately.

"The Department of Justice is going to have the opportunity to weigh in. They've had good success in Mississippi lately. They challenged the constitutionality of Mississippi's mental health system, and they won. They challenged the conditions at the Hinds County Detention Center, and they won. And here they would come and they would look at the same map that all the rest of us are looking at," Johnson said. "And they would conduct interviews, and they would get try to get to the bottom of the motivation behind what's happening here and this very unusual piece of legislation."

Should they decide that there is a constitutional issue with this legislation, Johnson said, the federal government could then sue the state, costing taxpayers outside Jackson as well.

"How on God's green earth can you decide that we're going to create special judges, just for Jackson, Mississippi, who, by the way, happens to have a majority African-American population? And then you go, 'Oh, I know how it looks. But it's not what you think,'" Thompson said during a news conference on February 14.

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The bill's author, Republican State Rep. Trey Lamar, represents Lafayette and Tate counties in north Mississippi.

Lamar has said repeatedly that his motivation behind the legislation is making Jackson safer and helping the Hinds County court system, but supporters have yet to provide any data to back those assertions up.

If the DOJ stepped in, agents would conduct interviews, and subpoena emails and texts, all in an effort to see what the motivation truly was.

"When the deposition starts, and when you start discovering emails and texts, and you find that the basis of this sweeping piece of legislation is a handful of stories about limited events in particular parts of town - and that's it, that's the underlying premise of the legislation - it's not going to be a good look, particularly when you know, the overlay on top of that is this map that is so troubling," Johnson said.

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Thompson's office did not return calls for comment and clarification on his interview.

HB 1020 must still pass the Senate and be signed by the governor before it can become law.

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